October 8, 1997

To: NOMAS Council

Dear Colleague

Since I left Portland I've been reflecting on my experiences at the M&M conference. While there was much at the conference I found inspiring, I've not been able to shake my overwhelming feelings of discouragement and dismay. Things were done and said in the name of NOMAS and pro-feminism that were at odds with what I believe is politically and morally responsible. I want to take the time here to share what I've been feeling with the NOMAS Council.

First, I was deeply upset by the opening ritual presented by the Sons and Daughters of Orpheus. As I was led by drums onto the lawn and into the circle, "smudged" with burning incense, and then made to listen to mystical prayers to the earth, my feelings of alienation grew so intense I had to walk away. This ritual was not offered as an optional event; everyone at the conference was expected to participate. In addition, we were not informed beforehand what kind of ceremony would take place.

Despite what may have been good intentions on the part of the organizers of the conference, this ceremony ran counter to the basic democratic principle of religious choice. This ritual was a religious ceremony that was imposed upon the entire conference. Participation in religious services must never be a requirement as it was at this M&M. Would the NOMAS Council have felt differently if instead of being smudged with incense we had all been asked to take communion? I see no difference in the affront to religious freedom. I am astonished that the NOMAS Council allowed this ceremony to take place.

Secondly, I fundamentally disagree with the decision to bring Robert Bly to the conference. I believe that he has no place at a pro-feminist gathering. Robert Bly's retrograde and dangerous views on gender, his trivialization of the oppression of women, his romanticization and distortion of the history of welfare, his unfounded and misogynous assertion that mothers are to blame for their son's enfeeblement and anguish are all inimical to pro-feminism and the stated mission of NOMAS.

I am not against honest debate or dialogue. Yet, as a prerequesite for meaningful debate there must be some common ground, some basic agreement on the nature of things. As a pro-feminist dedicated to gender justice, I do not accept the basic tenets of Robert Bly's world view. As I see it, pro-feminist debate with him is futile and virtually meaningless. (After hearing him speak at the M&M I am more convinced of this point.) I am saddened that within NOMAS there is enough accord with Robert Bly that we agreed to bring him to the conference and provided him with a platform to espouse his views.

Perhaps what disturbed me most at the conference were remarks made by Michael Kimmel during his address at the Special Event with Robert Bly. Michael reproached pro-feminists who "suggest such patently false slogans as: 'All men are rapists.' 'Pornography causes violence against women.' We know these to be false. All men are not rapists. Pornography usually causes masturbation not rape."

Michael's characterization of the views of anti-pornography pro-feminists is a crude and reductive distortion of our politics and beliefs. His claim that masturbation is the foremost consequence of pornography is simply wrong. Michael's glib statements disregard more than twenty years of feminist scholarship and testimony that confirm the ways that pornography harms women. Delivered in a forum where he represented the NOMAS point of view, Michael's remarks are especially insulting as NOMAS' Ending Men's Violence Network spent the previous day examining the harmful effects of pornography on our society.

I don't believe that the things I've described in this letter can be alleviated through processing at a Council Meeting, or discussion in an Affinity Group. I've come to realize that these are not isolated segments within NOMAS, but reflect something much deeper and troubling about the organization.

A pro-feminist organization that asks its members to partake in a religious service, gives a man who has denied the existence of male supremacy a forum, and whose star spokesperson trivializes the harms of pornography, I cannot be a part of. I must resign as co-chair of the NOMAS Pornography and Prostitution Task Group and request that I be taken off the list as an alternate to the NOMAS Council. I am appalled at the direction NOMAS is taking pro-feminism.

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